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Murray, Baird visit to push projects to ease congestion

Transportation - One would widen State Route 14, and the other would improve Port access

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VANCOUVER -- A pair of transportation projects planned to relieve congestion -- a new rail and road access into the Port of Vancouver, and the widening of State Route 14 -- drew two congressional Democrats to Clark County on Monday.

U.S. Sen. Patty Murray announced a \$2.3 million appropriation to conduct an environmental study for the \$95 million Port project, which is intended to ease train and truck congestion.

U.S. Rep. Brian Baird was in Washougal to be briefed on widening the highway to four lanes from the west end of Camas to the south end of State Route 500 in Washougal.

The Port plans to build a rail spur and a bypass road north along the alignment of the 26th Avenue Extension, bypassing the Fruit Valley neighborhood to connect with the main railroad line and Fruit Valley Road. The rail line is expected to cost about \$75 million and the road \$20 million.

With one rail entrance to the waterfront industries, every railcar temporarily blocks the north-south and east-west main tracks of BNSF Railway. The proposed spur track would connect to the north-south track north of the Vancouver switching yard.

The Port loaded or unloaded 43,000 railcars last year; with growing international trade, the total is projected at 120,000 in 20 years. At the same time, BNSF expects freight trains on the main lines to increase from today's 63 to 90 a day in 2025.

Murray said she has worked hard to increase federal investments in waterways, rail, highways and ports.

"The investment we're making today to improve transportation infrastructure lays the foundation for future economic growth," Murray said. "With one out of three jobs in Washington related to trade, it is vital to our economy to have sufficient road and rail systems."

Baird, in a roadside briefing in Washougal, praised the partnership behind the highway widening. That has included Washougal, Camas, the Port of Camas/Washougal, Clark County and several state agencies. Baird and Sens. Maria Cantwell, D-Wash., and Murray obtained \$1.3 million for the project's environmental work.

But the bulk of the \$40 million cost will come from the new 9.5 cent gasoline tax.

Don Wagner, regional administrator for the Washington State Department of Transportation, said the highway widening eventually will be extended east to the old Evergreen Highway. Total cost is estimated at \$100 million. Wagner expects construction of the first phase to start in 2009, with completion in 2011. The second phase is not scheduled, because there is no identified source of money.

"The state is maxed out on the gas tax," said state Rep. Richard Curtis, R-La Center. He credited local voices for lobbying to get the highway project funded but said he will look to Baird to get the additional \$60 million to complete the job.

Mike Kesler, a Washington State Patrol senior trooper, said the stretch of highway being widened saw 65 collisions in 2004, including a pair of fatal wrecks. He said aggressive driving in the area has become a problem.

While Kesler was reciting accident statistics, a driver passed Baird's group, drove through a stop sign without slowing, and turned onto State Route 14. Baird noted that Kesler "sure has convenient visual aids."